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XI.—*A Study of Lord Macaulay's English.*

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Nearly thirty years have elapsed since the death of LORD MACAULAY (December, 1859), a period sufficient to have witnessed the rise, the decline, and the decay of many reputations less brilliant than his own. (The year 1859 was fruitful in the death of eminent men of letters: HALLAM, DEQUINCEY, IRVING, PRESCOTT, MACAULAY.) It is the fate even of the finest genius to incur detraction, and in our era, MACAULAY has been the special victim of critics. He has provoked the polished cynicism of MR. MATTHEW ARNOLD, the cautious censure of BISHOP STUBBS, and received only the qualified approbation of one of his most discriminating biographers, the late Rector of Lincoln College. Save his nephew, MR. TREVELYAN, and MR. EDWARD A. FREEMAN,¹ few writers of our time are just in their appreciation of his genius, or in their estimate of his impress upon the character of our language. Yet his influence upon the fortunes of English speech was never more potent than at present, and may be discovered by the critical student in many phases of our literature where its agency was not suspected.—Let us endeavor to trace in detail some of the sources of LORD MACAULAY'S diction, some of the secret springs that impelled into activity the most perspicuous and fascinating prose style which has appeared in modern English literature.

At the time of MACAULAY'S birth (October 1800), the great Romantic movement coincident with the last decades of the Georgian era, was approaching its maturity—BYRON was twelve years old; COLERIDGE had produced his most characteristic poems; TENNYSON was yet unborn; the great apostle of Romanticism issued the first of his three supreme efforts in 1805; the triumphs of KEATS and SHELLEY were still in the future.—The poetic diction of the eighteenth century was yielding to the theory of the spontaneous, in the political as in the intellectual sphere, old things were passing away, all things were becoming new. In this era and amid these quickening influences, MACAULAY was born. To trace the genesis of a great author's diction is an

¹See 'Methods of Historical Study,' pages 105-6.

instructive and delightful task. In the case of LORD MACAULAY, we have the assistance of TREVELYAN's admirable biography, perhaps slightly colored by the partial tone of devoted affection, yet accurate in detail and fascinating in treatment. Strange as it may be, MACAULAY seems to have had little sympathy with the dominant literary tendencies of his own age. His tastes and affinities identified him with the eighteenth century, he studied the literary creations of the Addisonian time with assiduous and affectionate care, and in the essay upon ADDISON, we have a dim intimation of the brilliant picture he would have added to the richness of our literature, had he been spared to complete his 'History of England.' Yet the strongest and most abiding influences are sometimes those whose agency is not suspected, or whose existence is least apparent. The revolutionary fervor of the period coincident with MACAULAY's youth imparted a superb glow to a style formed by the delicate observance of aesthetic and artistic principles. It relieved it from the possible danger of degenerating into cold and inanimate rhetoric, by infusing some measure of that romantic ardor and creative energy which marked the "spacious times" of BYRON, SHELLEY, SCOTT and KEATS.

The eloquence of BURKE, assuming a richer coloring with the flight of years, was an important influence in the formation of MACAULAY's diction. The style of BURKE, as illustrated in many passages of his 'Abridgment of English History' (a work whose rare merits, philosophic wisdom and wealth of learning should have earned for it a more extended recognition than has thus far been accorded it) is suggestive and anticipatory of many characteristic chapters in the 'History of England.' In order to illustrate the accuracy of this general statement by concrete examples, we have only to observe carefully the peculiar rhythm and cadence of numerous passages from the 'Abridgment,' and mark their resemblance to certain passages in the 'History of England,' which have become part of the classic riches of our tongue.—The rhetorical inspiration communicated by the diligent study of BURKE, the unconscious quickening received from the dominant creative impulses of his era, the fastidious care bestowed upon the Addisonian age, together with the influence of that mode of classical training once prevalent in the Universities, in which scrupulous regard was had to the inculcation of *literary form* rather than to a technical and exacting philological study—these are the principal elements in

the evolution of that prose diction which has constituted one of the literary phenomena of our century.

When we pass to the consideration of MACAULAY's descriptive faculty, we find that the secret of his strength in this respect is largely due to the inspiration and example of SIR WALTER SCOTT. It is to SIR WALTER that both CARLYLE and MACAULAY are indebted for their power of calling back the banished ages. It is with the *style* and *diction* of MACAULAY that we are more especially concerned, and the investigating of his mode of historic presentation is scarcely within the scope of a philological discussion. The student of our literary development will remember that the growth of MACAULAY's power as an essayist, for it was in this capacity that he first achieved renown, is coincident with the period that saw the decline of the Georgian era, and the reversion to the supremacy of prose, as well as the rise of modern physical science and of comparative philology. The 'Essay upon Milton' (1825,) first drew the eye of the literary world to MACAULAY. BYRON died in the year preceding (1824;) KEATS and SHELLEY in 1821-22; WALTER SCOTT in 1832. The year was also signalized by the death of GOETHE and CUVIER, and by the passage of the great Reform Bill.

The style of MACAULAY was maturing throughout the period embraced by the decline of poetry and the reaction towards prose. Yet it was a prose which, with notable exceptions, was marked by hardness and coldness of style or colored by passages of unwonted glow and brilliance, such as suffuse the sermons of NEWMAN and the portraiture of RUSKINS. The classical and artistic nature of MACAULAY, stimulated by the study of Addisonian models, was too strongly developed to succumb either to the romantic tone of the departing era, or to the marked and powerful vein of prose-poetry which was so conspicuous a feature of the incoming literary dispensation. Still, his language absorbed some rays of that poetic brilliance, as the famous description of the Puritan character in the "Essay on Milton" abundantly attests. We find, then, as the basis of his style, the classical or artistic element which, so far as our own literature is concerned, reaches its most graceful expression in the Augustan age of ANNE. By the blending of these elements, the classical or artistic, and the romantic, which formed an unconscious inspiration, together with the quickening power of BURKE's majestic rhetoric, was matured the literary character of MACAULAY. He

seemed to "take occasion by the hand," and there is no just cause of surprise that the resultant of such forces should have been an English style, the charm and power of which will last as long as the memory of our race and language.

The investigation of that peculiar phase of our speech known in popular phrase as *Euphuism*, has a fascination for the student of our literary development. It has been traced to many lands and to varied influence: to Spain, to Italy and to the Platonic philosophy. A more rational solution would perhaps explain it as a characteristic at some period of its history of nearly every language, an intimate tendency rather than the resultant of external forces. In its relation to the English tongue, *Euphuism* seems to have been an unconscious forecaste or anticipation of the modern prose style, which developed in English during the second half of the seventeenth century. Its charm lay largely in its novelty, for it was a departure from the orthodox standard or periodic sentence of which the lighter Elizabethan world had grown weary. It inculcated the graces of literary form by example, and the brilliant antithesis of MACAULAY displays in its perfected forms some of the characteristic traits of our Elizabethan *Euphuism*.

A minute investigation of the inmost life of a literary epoch reveals the geminal or seminal forces whose matured vigor will be apparent in the following age. In the complex types of the Elizabethan time, may be discovered the dim beginnings of every succeeding development of our language and our literature. The philosophic student of our linguistic growth will encounter no difficulty in recognizing in the much travestied *Euphuism* of Elizabethan times, the prelude to the antithesis of MACAULAY. The fascination of his diction is the wonder and the despair of his imitators. It is a concrete illustration of Quintilian's ideal literary artist, he who not only writes so that he may be understood, but that he cannot be misunderstood. The lucidity of his language is one of the principal sources of his power. The mind in its habitual state averse from continuous or prolonged tension, is taken captive by the cadence of his periods and the judgment yields an almost unconscious assent to his bold generalizations and graphic delineations, however they may conflict with inherited prejudices or transmitted opinions. The investigation of his language would prove an attractive study to the critic who approaches it from the stand-point of musical

harmony. It was no native sensibility that quickened the exquisite melody of his phrases.

That English is marred by an exuberance of cacophony is a truth of which every teacher of the delicate art of composition is painfully conscious. So notable a feature of our tongue is cacophony, that a truly melodious diction is rare of attainment. It is one of the merits of MACAULAY to have shaped out of contending forces,—in a season of linguistic transition when revolt was assailing artistic principles and unfaltering confidence in the stimulus of inspiration was superseding the painful processes, and the fastidious diligence of POPE and ADDISON,—a style in which are fused by a happy process of synthesis the distinctive charm and the distinctive strength of two great epochs in our literary history. The rich development of prose poetry that followed in the wake of the Georgian era in no measure disturbed the symmetry of his style or marred the purity of his diction. The artist reigned supreme, however much of his golden coloring may have been reflected like some after-glow from the splendor of the preceding day. No trust in the “spontaneous,” no theory of inspiration quickening latent energy into dynamic force, modified that affectionate assiduity or abated that painful concentration by which he developed those prose harmonies that have become wrought into the texture and essence of our language.

Among writers of prose, MACAULAY'S position is similar to that of TENNYSON among masters of verse. In each the artistic nature is the controlling power, but the fastidious mechanism of the Laureate was elaborated amid the cold and sedate environment of the Victorian day, that of MACAULAY was at least quickened amid the glow and passion of the Georgian era. In the earlier works, his characteristic style is distinctly formed, and in the history of his literary evolution we have a refutation of that criticism which deals with so delicate a product of genius as literary form, as if it were regulated by arbitrary rule or determined by established convention. The harmony of his diction is distinctly foreshadowed in the rather efforts of the Cambridge undergraduate, whence it expounds and develops until it ripens into the flower of perfect art in the serene splendor of his matured greatness. The moral law of art, the creed of literary purity, has rarely been maintained with more devoted faithfulness by any historian of any age. Upon

this, rests his assured claim to perpetual remembrance. It is a cause of regret that the complex environment, the severe nervous tension, and paradoxical as it may seem, the wide embracing instrumentalities of common school machinery, should seriously disturb the conditions essential to the higher mode of literary culture. The inchoately formed mind, the typical product of the American school, is impatient of ideals and intolerant of idealists. SHAKESPEARE and BEN JONSON were content with each others approbation and scorned the plaudits of the illiterate semi-savages for whose entertainment they wrote. The removes were vastly greater, Baconian philosophy, physical science, public school systems, all penetrating periodical literature, had not then leavened the whole lump and placed the idealist and the empiric, the scholar and the charlatan upon nearly coinciding planes in vulgar estimation. It "is the mob of gentlemen that *read* with ease," who disdain esoteric seclusion and shrink from mental effort that regulate and direct the tone and quality of modern literary production. Perhaps the saddest of all changes in our contemporary literature is the decadence of that scrupulous regard for structural beauty, the decline of aesthetic sensibility. The tendency has been marked since the death of MACAULAY, and we may assume the period introduced by the American Civil War, as a convenient *terminus a quo* from which to date its violent and stimulated action. IRVING and PRESCOTT, the first of whom reproduced the genial graces of ADDISON, the second of whom was our acknowledged chief in the art of historic composition, passed away the same year with MACAULAY, leaving no successors in the charm of style, however much they may have been excelled in the technical elements of scientific accuracy and scholarly precision.

Our modern school of philologists have, in disregard of literary form, sinned above all men that dwell upon the earth. The typical philologic style manifests that ripeness of corruption already referred to, which happily mocks at imitation, but retards the advance of philological acquisition by the uncouth and forbidding guise in which it is commended to us. When the fulness of decline shall have been attained and the reaction against literary licenes sets in, as set in it must, from sheer satiety if from no more exalted impulse, the chastness of MACAULAY'S English will be estimated by a generation to whom the spirit of rational appreciation has returned and from whom the demon of literary

impurity has been cast out. His true greatness may be in the future—possibly in the remote future—but of his abiding fame there is no ground of reasonable doubt. In the sphere of the intellectual as in the domain of the spiritual, the eternal verities must prevail, renown gendered by sciolism cannot withstand the scrutiny of the greatest of innovators. Our own age has well nigh forgotten the grand lesson of fidelity to truth as embodied in literary form, and that at a time when the vision of Verulam is passing from imagination into objectivity, and man “is taking all knowledge for his province.”—It is alleged by HARRIET MARTINEAU in her essay upon MACAULAY, that he was lacking in sensibility and deficient in every element of the pathetic. The charge is refuted by the whole tenor of his life, by his “little unremembered deeds of kindness and of love,” by his “strong benevolence of soul,” by the consecration of his energies to the welfare and happiness of others.

I have endeavored to portray the literary character of LORD MACAULAY, to discover the sources of his strength, the secret springs of his power, and the grounds upon which his claim to immortality must rest: (a detailed presentation of any one of these phases of the subject would involve a more elaborate discussion than is consistent with the rational limits of a mere essay). Most especially have I endeavored to inculcate the lesson taught by his life and enforced by his example, the lesson of faithfulness to literature as an art, the maintenance of its purity and its ideality above all considerations of expediency or material aggrandizement. That the lesson is one of supreme import to our generation and to our contemporary literature, cannot be too earnestly insisted upon or too emphatically presented. Such a life as MACAULAY'S is given for our instruction, if we will but take heed, if we will no longer be content merely to reach “the limits of a vulgar fate,” while literary art is sacrificed to profligacy and literary virtue is led astray by sensationalism.